

# Ornithological Literature

Edited by Mary Gustafson

THE NATURE OF NEBRASKA. By Paul A. Johnsgard. Univ. of Nebraska Press, Lincoln. 2001. 402 pp., illustrated by the author, 14 maps, 3 tables. \$29.95.—Anyone interested in birds will be familiar with the many books written by Paul Johnsgard, currently a list of at least 40 titles. As each new book appears, I can't help but wonder how Dr. Johnsgard successfully continues to plow new ground. Thus it was with considerable curiosity that I delved into one of his newest, *The nature of Nebraska*. Perhaps not unsurprisingly, I was both pleased and disappointed. The book sets out to provide a comprehensive source of information about the animals and plants that might be encountered by Nebraskans and, as suggested by Johnsgard, to plant "some lasting ideas in the minds of readers" about the fauna and flora of Nebraska and their role "in the greater scheme of things." The book is based on an idea Johnsgard had after speaking to a 4th grade class, and is dedicated to "the children of Nebraska," although a read through the book suggests that it is clearly directed at a broader audience.

As one intimately familiar with Nebraska's birds, but lacking depth of knowledge of other animals and plants, I found the book to be a stimulating read and of greatest use in its discussion of the nonavian fauna and flora to be found in the various Ecological Regions of Nebraska defined by Johnsgard. Each ecological region is treated in a separate chapter; each chapter starts with a general introduction to the region, including geological information and a brief discussion of each major community existing therein. There follows a series of discussions of Keystone and Typical Species found within the ecological region. These discussions are the most interesting and useful part of the book, and can be expected to achieve Johnsgard's aim of planting "lasting ideas" in the minds of his readers. Under Ponderosa Pines and Rimrock, the ecological region found in Nebraska's far northwest, major communities described are Western Conifer-

ous Forest, Mountain Mahogany Shrubland, and Pine Ridge Sandy-Slope Prairie. All conjure up exciting thoughts about what animals and plants one might discover there. Johnsgard does not disappoint the reader, following with evocative (a well-deserved word often used by reviewers of Johnsgard's natural history writing) and informative treatment of several species, including ponderosa pine (*Pinus ponderosa*), Prairie Falcon (*Falco mexicanus*), and mountain lion (*Felis concolor*). At the opposite end of the state lies the ecological region Johnsgard nostalgically calls The Forests of Home: the Missouri Valley and Eastern Deciduous Forest. Two of the communities of this region discussed are Southeastern Upland Forest and Eastern Floodplain Forest, and species discussed include bur oak (*Quercus macrocarpa*), fox squirrel (*Sciurus niger*), luna moth (*Actias luna*), ginseng (*Panax quinquefolius*), and Broad-winged Hawk (*Buteo platypterus*), a mix likely to arouse the curiosity of almost any reader. Johnsgard satisfies this curiosity admirably.

These sections on ecological regions are the most important part of the book and can be expected to contribute greatly to understanding by the lay public of *the nature of Nebraska*. Upon discovering, however, that these sections comprise only half of the 400-page book, I was curious about what Johnsgard had in mind for the remaining 200 pages. These consist primarily of three appendices, the first a comprehensive listing of Nebraska's fauna and flora, the second a guide to Nebraska's natural areas and reserves, and the third an index to notes of the Nebraska State Museum and items in the magazine *Nebraskaland* (published by the State of Nebraska's Game and Parks Dept.) that relate to Nebraska's natural history. Unfortunately, these appendices add considerably to the length of the book and are of little interest or even use to the average Nebraskan. There are many excellent field guides that clearly indicate which species can be found in Nebraska; these guides are readily available in the large national bookstores.

Many of the nature groups (for trees, birds, wildflowers, prairie grasslands) have guides specific to Nebraska already available. In addition, anyone interested in discovering Nebraska's wild places could simply use the excellent and readily available *Nebraska atlas and gazetteer*, published by DeLorme, which clearly shows all of the state parks, state wildlife management areas, national wildlife refuges, and federal waterfowl production areas within the state. Armed with the first half of Johnsgard's book, an appropriate field guide, and the DeLorme atlas, much could be discovered by the keen nature buff. Bare lists of species, in this case occupying all of 70 pages, are not particularly useful to persons who find themselves in a natural area and want to identify the wildlife around them.

The book concludes with a glossary, two sections of references, and an index. The glossary is lengthy, but useful and informative. The first reference section, which provides source references for each chapter of the book, is very good, and should be considered a complete bibliography to recent literature on the natural history of Nebraska. The second reference section, which lists references used in compiling the species lists, also is comprehensive and is organized by faunal and floral groups. In constructing the list of Nebraska's birds, Johnsgard used his own self-published (2000) list *The birds of Nebraska* as well as the recently published (2001) *The Nebraska breeding bird atlas*, compiled by Wayne Mollhoff. In my opinion, for various reasons, each is unsuited for the purpose, resulting in numerous inaccuracies and inconsistencies in the bird list. Consequently, one wonders whether the lists of other fauna and flora presented are up to the standards that might be expected by those with expertise in those areas. By far the most confusing aspect of Johnsgard's bird list is the absence of any definition of the terms used. While these are familiar within the birding world, the audience Johnsgard directs his book toward probably has no inkling of their meanings. Most startling is the apparently interchangeable use of "common" and "regular"; Johnsgard fails to differentiate between descriptors which refer to occurrence (regular, casual) and those referring to abundance (common, uncommon, rare). This failure leads to confusing designations of status such as

those for Virginia Rail (*Rallus limicola*; "regular summer resident") and Sora (*Porzana carolina*; "common summer resident"). Which of these two species is more likely to be encountered? Another confusing term, used for several species including the Northern Goshawk (*Accipiter gentilis*), is "wintering migrant." This oxymoronic term goes unexplained. The term "local" is used without consistency; Wild Turkey (*Meleagris gallopavo*) is considered a "locally common resident" and Mississippi Kite (*Ictinia mississippiensis*) a "rare summer resident (west)," when the former breeds statewide in numbers and the latter at only one known location, Ogallala, where it is best described as locally uncommon.

Furthermore, there are several factual errors which would have been avoided with careful review. Following are a few examples among nonpasserines; a quick look suggests similar problems with the passerines. Forster's Tern (*Sterna forsteri*) is described as a "regular summer resident (west and central)" and Common Tern (*S. hirundo*) as a "regular migrant (east)." A reader could assume from this that a *Sterna* tern seen in eastern Nebraska would be a Common and one in the west a Forster's. In fact, both occur statewide in migration, but Johnsgard does not mention any migration status for the latter species. Calliope Hummingbird (*Stellula calliope*) is described as a "very rare migrant" and both Rufous (*Selasphorus rufus*) and Broad-tailed hummingbirds (*S. platycercus*) as "casual migrants", whereas the opposite is correct, and in fact Rufous Hummingbird is rather common in the Panhandle in late July and August, where it is the expected species. Barrow's Goldeneye (*Bucephala islandica*) is described as a "casual migrant"; in fact it is a regular, rare winter visitor. Great Egret (*Ardea alba*) is described as a "rare breeder," when in fact there is only one breeding record. Cooper's Hawk (*Accipiter cooperii*) is described as a "rare resident" when in fact it is a fairly common, if not common breeder. Red-shouldered (*Buteo lineatus*) and Broad-winged hawks are described as "extirpated?" even though evidence of breeding for both species has been published in the last few years.

Despite serious misgivings regarding the bird list, I recommend this book whole-heart-

edly to the audience for which Johnsgard wrote, the lay public. It is interesting to read, informative, evocative, and a handy reference for anyone venturing out into Nebraska's

many and fascinating wild places. It is a pity that the book would have achieved this admirable purpose without most of the last 200 pages.—W. ROSS SILCOCK.